A Christian Philosophy of Marriage

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NEW YORK 25, N. Y.

by

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The command of the marriage service, "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder," is usually taken as a simple interdiction of divorce. This, of course, it is; particularly, as it was in a discussion of divorce that Jesus originally gave it. But if we go even slightly below this superficial meaning, we have to ask ourselves two questions, the answers to which will go a long way toward helping us build a Christian philosophy of marriage. The first is: How does God join two people together in Holy Matrimony? and the second is, who "puts the marriage asunder" and how do they do it? Let us try to answer these questions in order.

Two Questions Asked

The marriage service is the outward symbol of God's grace which joins the man and woman in a dynamic, creative, growing, spiritual union that truly makes "the twain one flesh." It is only the beginning. As the spark set to the tinder releases the flame, so the spiritual union of a couple in marriage releases potentialities in both that neither could possibly attain alone. For the first time they are complete people. Like a great tree such a marriage keeps on growing and expanding as long as the couple lives. Growth is the hall-mark of a God-joined couple, — individual growth in maturity and in spiritual awareness and growth together.

This principle of growth carries with it, however, an alarming corrolary; if a marriage is not growing, it is shrinking. If a couple is not coming closer together all the time, they are slowly drifting apart. If their love for each other is not increasing, if their faith is not growing stronger, if their understanding and unselfishness are not deepening and broadening, then they will soon find that their capacity for all these things has decreased or disappeared. Marriage is never static. If the couple is not consciously reaching up toward higher spiritual goals, they will become incapable of looking up at all, — indeed of looking beyond their own very limited egos. Jesus said: "He that is not with me is against me," and this is a similar situation. The truth of this statement is obvious; an automobile stalled in the middle of a busy street disrupts traffic just as much as it would if it were backing up!

Marriage Never Static

The converse to all this is the answer to the second question. It is usually the members of the couple themselves that put the marriage asunder simply through neglect and lack of growth. It is not because they do something wrong but because they are not constantly striving for the highest that they draw apart. Infidelity and "mental cruelty" are not causes of divorce, they are the consequences of the failure of spiritual growth of a marriage. The couple who in faith and through God are learning to love each other more find their marriage constantly assuming new dimensions in depth and breadth and new beauty and power as they go along. Infidelity and "mental cruelty" never enter their heads as they are too much occupied with other things. If the house is swept and garnished and left empty, seven devils will take

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it over. If it is filled to overflowing with outgoing love and buoyant faith this can never happen.

We have talked about growth and have compared marriage to a tree. The analogy holds one step further: Growing things need nourishment. Just as a tree spreads its roots gathering food and water from the soil, so a marriage must constantly be fed if it is to grow spiritually strong. Of course, seeds contain a greater or lesser supply of food and the embryo plant can get a fair start on that alone. But sooner or later it will wither and die unless it finds new sources of nourishment when those that are stored in it are used up.

So it is with marriage. For a few months or a year or so it will carry along and even grow a little without much help. But this is just the time when it should be put in fertile soil rich with nourishment if it is to get a good start and if its roots are to take firm hold. It is at the start of a marriage when love is a rosy glow and the excitment of your new life together is at its peak that you form those patterns of living together that will last all your life. It is then that you prepare the ground so that future growth will be uninterrupted; and it is then that those bands are first formed which, strengthened and grown to maturity, will later bind you indissolubly in one flesh.

The Need of Nourishment

The sources of this nourishment are several. Some have been mentioned indirectly already but the implications of all of them are such that they deserve closer study.

The first and perhaps the most important is Faith. In undertaking any new enterprise one needs faith of some sort if it is only faith in his own judgment! But this is different. In marriage we enter into a contract not only with one partner, *but with God as well.* This is no earthly contract between two parties but a spiritual God-joined partnership that lasts "till death do us part." A God-given and God-oriented faith is not only essential to such a partnership, it is an organic part of it. A marriage that is not founded in such a faith is not truly a Christian marriage.

The Need of Faith

This is actually a very practical matter. Faith in each other (and this is a logical corollary in a God-joined marriage) is necessary if a couple is to rise above the petty disagreements of everyday living. Without faith, the inevitable differences and clashes in points of view, the petty selfishness that engulfs even the best intentioned of us at times, and the misunderstandings and hurt feelings — small things in themselves — build up into serious disagreements and drive a couple apart. With faith, they are dissolved in understanding and love and furnish occasion for spiritual exercises and growth.

But faith goes even deeper than this. You must have faith that your husband or wife has the same basic point of view. "Confidence" is perhaps a better word. Will your husband or wife have the capacity for spiritual growth and set up the same sort of standards in life that you do? Herein

"Confidence" a Better Word

lies the difficulty of marrying someone whose background — national, social, economic, or religious — is different to your own. If you do, it is harder to agree on what is important and what is not important particularly with reference to bringing up children. Please do not misunderstand: This is not an expression of a narrow-minded, class-conscious point of view, but the statement of a practical fact. It does not make it impossible to create the type of marriage we are talking about, but it does make it more difficult and requires of each member of the couple a great deal more self-control and understanding.

Perhaps this is the place to mention the somewhat related topic of mutual interests. This is again a very practical matter for it should be obvious, to use an extreme example, that a poet married to a plumber will have very little common ground on which they can build their life together.

Things in Common

This does not mean that you both have to be either poets or plumbers, in fact such a complete identity of interests can be stultifying. But it does mean that you have to have some things in common and be at least conversant with and appreciative of the interests of your husband or wife which are not strictly your own. A wife, for instance should at least know enough about her husband's business so that she can listen intelligently and should show some interest in it when he comes home full of enthusiasm over the day's work. It goes without saying that this is a reciprocal relationship in which the husband has to be interested in his wife's doings as well and perhaps

it is not amiss to re-emphasize the fact that a common religious interest is the surest ground on which to build this mutual understanding.

The other source from which a growing marriage derives nourishment is love. Now this word "love" has a number of meanings of which three are important for us. The first is the love between a man and woman which we call sex. The second might be called "loyalty," your feeling for your husband or wife in that capacity rather than as a person. For the third, we have no single word in English but it has been adequately described by St. Paul in the 13th Chapter of I Corinthians, — the chapter starting: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity (love), I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." All three kinds of love are blended in a Christian marriage and we would do well to examine each in some detail as each is necessary.

Different Meanings of Love

It is difficult to write about sex for a group of unknown readers. Our bringing up, our reactions, our feelings about this subject are so varied and so strong that not only is what one says likely to be misconstrued but, more important, the spirit in which he says it often misunderstood. For some people, the very words are so "loaded" that they cannot be read rationally, and preconceived ideas on the subject are so deeply rooted that they are not amenable to change. Having said that, let us proceed to examine the place of this sort of love in marriage.

The first thing to remember is that we belong to the animal kingdom, not the vegetable. As members of this group, we have inherited certain instincts and emotions that are proper, necessary to us and to the race and given to us by God. The sex instinct is one of them, the appetite for food another. If these were suddenly abolished it would be disastrous for us individually and for the race. But we like to think we are better than the animals and it is from this that most of the trouble comes. In a number of people through the ages the ideal of the "holy life" has been the celibate ascetic, one who represses all worldly desires and gives himself wholly to the spiritual life. Now this may be all very well for an occasional individual even though it does fly in the face of modern psychiatric teaching but it would not do for all of us. Consequently, some other proof of our spiritual superiority must be discovered. There is one, and perhaps it can best be expressed in this way. With the animals these instincts are goals to be attained; they are what the animal lives for; they shut in and limit his horizon. With us they are stepping stones to something higher, something entirely outside the realm of the physical. They are doors through which we pass into the spiritual and instead of being limited and shut in by them, we use them as the way to wider horizons of mutual love and trust.

In practice it works this way. When you love someone enough to marry them you want to give that person a gift commensurate with your love. You want to offer the best, the most complete and most personal thing you have, which

is, of course, yourself. You have already given yourself spiritually in the marriage service and at intercouse you complete this gift by giving yourself physically as well. At the same time, you are receiving the same gift from your partner and the physical pleasure of this mutual act of giving and receiving becomes the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual feeling you have for each other. It is truly the sacrament of your love which expresses it, strengthens it and fulfills it. It is through the physical that we rise to the spiritual; and it is only in the complete and enthusiastic giving of ourselves to our husband or wife and our equally complete and enthusiastic acceptance of what he or she gives us, that we can ever attain the complete goal of a spiritually mature Christian marrige.

Offering the Best

The second meaning of love is Loyalty. This means loyalty not only to each other as members of the great company of married people but loyalty to the *institution* of marriage itself. Just because two people are married each should have in the other's eyes a dignity and importance that they did not have before. This idea of the dignity of "wifehood" corresponds to similar but more familiar ideas of the importance of "motherhood." It is the girl who is now a wife or the boy who is now a husband who have grown in stature and deserve our loyalty. The institution of marriage deserves our loyalty, also, and no where is there a more devastating indictment of our American lack of maturity than in the disrespect we have for it as an institution. From the complacency with which we

Loyalty

tolerate divorce to the barrage of cartoons picturing unhappy and not very amusing domestic situations, *marriage is derided and degraded on every side.* Everyone of these things takes a little something away from your marriage and from mine by casting aspersions on the institution of which we, as married couples, are members.

Disrespect breeds contempt and only when marriage is once again treated with respect and loyalty, especially by people who are married, will we ever get anywhere in our efforts to reduce the frightening number of divorces.

The third definition of love, is not only the most important from the point of view of marriage, but is also the most difficult to describe. Probably the best way of expressing it is to say that it means that we should treat our husbands or wives the way we hope (or expect!) God will treat us. "He hath not dealt with us after our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities," is one side of this. This certainly means free and outgoing forgiveness; a relationship in which petty annoyances, jealousies and hurt feelings are withered by the rays of love; a togetherness in which there is no room for sullen brooding over past events and the gradual building of large barriers out of tiny incidents. But it is a great deal more than this. It is a positive reaching out to the other one, an exercise of your love and thoughtfulness and self control and concern for your husband or wife every minute of every day. Since these are all traits which grow stronger with use, their importance is

Understanding Each Other

obvious. It is perhaps in this field that most people fail. They do not appreciate the necessity for a positive, conscious thoughtfulness and concern for each other that grow stronger as they go their way together. They allow their relationship to become routine, at which point of course, growth stops. They step into habit patterns in dealing with each other instead of trying to make each everyday contact something special, and worst of all they take each other for granted.

We have a saying in common speech: "The honeymoon is over," and this reflects the popular mind's appreciation of what we have been trying to say. In a truly Christian marriage, the honeymoon is never over. This is not to say that everything is always "sweetness and light" with no disagreements or troubles. No two rational adults can agree on everything. But it does mean that such difficulties are dissolved in a love that has been kept fresh by countless small acts of unselfishness and devotion, day in and day out. These are the basic fuel that keeps the flame of love burning, the food that keeps it growing, the stimulus to spiritual development. They are what make and keep you "one flesh."

"Honeymoon" Never Over

This leads to another facet of the third meaning of the word love. This kind of love requires that we go more than half way and that we voluntarily do more than the maximum expected of us, not with the idea of getting thereby praise or merit, but just because we are in love. When we are just married, this happens without our thinking about it but it is one of the things that is frequently lost by people who are

not aware of its importance. But it is important, and perhaps this will be more obvious if we put it this way: When you are just married your husband or wife thinks you are the most wonderful person in the world; will your behavior be such that they still think so five years from now, or ten, or twenty?

What About 20 Years From Now?

This is, of course, the test of a God-joined marriage, this continuing conviction that through the years and in spite of everything, your husband or wife is the most wonderful person in the world! As your criteria for judging have matured, your husband or wife has grown to meet them; as great sorrows or great joys have overtaken you, he or she has risen above them with you; as your days stretch into years of growing togetherness, your love for each other has led you to an ever-deepening love for God and an ever-increasing awareness of His all-embracing love for you.

Please do not think that what has been said is an impossibly distant ideal unattainable by the average person. We never know our capacities until we test them and our potential for growth is frequently not obvious until the necessity for growth is upon us. But most important, this is not something that we do alone. God's grace is ours for the asking; his Holy Spirit works in and through us. With His help, no matter how high the goal, we can win it.

Single copies, 10 cents
$7.00 per 100